

Address by Sir John Willison, LL.D.
at the Memorial Service for
SIR GEORGE ROBERT PARKIN
K.C.M.G., D.C.L., LL.D., at St. James'
Cathedral, Toronto, 28th. June, 1922

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SIR GEORGE PARKIN

In this Cathedral Sir George Parkin often worshipped. A former rector of St. James' conducted the service when he was laid to rest near his old cottage on the Thames. For many years he was a familiar figure in the streets of Toronto. Many of us have heard his voice again and again in persuasive appeal for the faiths which he cherished and in ringing challenge to the things which he distrusted and opposed. It is hard to believe that the eager and energetic spirit has left the tenement in which it was held but where it never reposed, and that henceforth there is only silence and remembrance.

One thinks first of Dr. Parkin as a friend and a counsellor, intimate, impulsive, expansive, abounding in a glorious optimism, and yet with all his fervour tempered by a gracious serenity. Few men could have had greater capacity for friendship. In the confidence which men gave him instinctively there was the quick flowering of affection. No man guarded his tongue when he talked with Dr. Parkin. He drew the best out of men because he gave his best and because they knew there was a level below which he could not descend. He never believed that all men

were born with equal gifts and powers but he could not be arrogant or intolerant. In the phrase of Kipling he could "walk with kings nor lose the common touch." In his public career there was much of controversy and contention. He championed positive causes and never compromised for any prospect of personal recognition or reward. If ever a man was unworldly he was and yet one doubts if he ever was conscious of his unworldliness or ever thought how much he gave and how poor was his return in the things which are so sorely needed in seasons of adversity. He was one

Of those to whom the miseries of the world
Are misery, and will not let them rest.

Such men have no time to think of themselves and if Providence is unkind they are undone. But in his case Providence at least was not wholly unkind and he had much of peace and happiness even if he never had complete release from labour and conflict. No man ever was more fortunate in his home or more blessed to have as the companion of his journey the gracious lady whom we reverence in her sorrow, who understood all his impulses and aspirations, from whose fortitude he drew strength and through whose example he was disciplined and ennobled.

In youth Dr. Parkin's mind turned towards public causes. He never "ceased from mental fight" while life lasted, and he did something to build Jerusalem in Canada as well as

in "England's green and pleasant land." Lord Shaftesbury said that "God gave Charles Dickens a retainer against all suffering and oppression." George R. Parkin had a retainer for all movements which sought to improve human conditions, to draw men into honourable public service, to maintain integrity in government, and to increase the efficiency of political institutions. He never so flamed with indignation as when he denounced public jobbery. He never was more happy than when he could praise faithful service to the State; never more courageous than when he stood against partisan malignity and rebuked irresponsible prejudices. Among his contemporaries at Oxford was Lord Milner with whose life his in some degree ran in parallel courses and with whom he had a pleasant relationship to the end. He was Secretary of the Oxford Union when such men as Mr. Asquith and Lord Milner were its ornaments and the freshness, vigour, energy and occasional audacity of the impetuous Canadian remain a tradition in the Union. But always where Dr. Parkin was there was life and the impulse to high endeavour and instant, energetic doing.

Dr. Parkin was a devoted Churchman but he had none of the narrowness of the sectarian bigot. He would have said with Joaquin Miller that "Good is good in every tongue." But he observed custom and honoured tradition. Some of us have heard him read the

lessons in the parish church at Goring-on-Thames and know how he revered the Book from which he read, how deeply rooted was his Christian faith and how unobtrusive and diligent he was in the precept and practice of his religion. But here again his essential liberality of temper and outlook were revealed. No man was more influential in the great movement in England to establish and extend the authority of the laity in the councils of the Church and carry the spirit of a reasonable and reverent democracy into an ancient and exclusive ecclesiastical autocracy. In this task indeed he was greatly engaged during his last years, not in the temper of a destructionist, not as one who saw no value in custom and tradition, not from the mere desire to recast and rebuild, but to preserve, to reconcile, to strengthen the ancient foundations, and to make a free Church for a free people in harmony with the freer institutions of the Commonwealth, and in reasonable obedience to the conception of popular sovereignty in which now lie the powers and the sanctities of government.

For half a century Sir George Parkin was a missionary of Empire and a wise counsellor of Imperial statesmen in the Dominions and in the Mother Country. There are few considerable communities under the flag in which his voice was not heard in assertion of the freedom and dignity of British institutions and in appeal for co-operation to ensure

the unity and stability of the Empire. More than thirty years ago he accepted a commission from the Imperial Federation League to carry the gospel of unity round the Empire and from the seed of his sowing there has been an abundant harvest. It may be that here and there the seed fell upon stony ground or that the grain was not according to the seed. But even upon the most reluctant soil no tares grew to choke the harvest of his vision. No project of organic federation yet commands the general support of the British peoples. It may be that the conception of Empire which attracted the early federationists will never be embodied in an Imperial constitution. Through the future as through the past the Empire will take its own way to its own destiny. But if Sir George Parkin never saw the actual form of the structure which he conceived he saw the fact of Empire realized in common effort and common sacrifice and he was content.

It was ever the spirit rather than the letter which he exalted. He saw the goal and so long as men travelled towards it he cared little whether they marched over the hill or through the valley. It is true that Dr. Parkin and his confederates kept the flame of Empire burning in Canada when the winds of doubt and indifference were blowing upon it and when many of those who now hold the torch aloft believed that its light would

be extinguished. And who shall say how far his voice carried or how wide and deep the effect of his teaching. At least it is true that ever since he set out upon his pilgrimage Imperial sentiment has spread and strengthened and the faith and fact of Empire have sunk ever deeper into the minds and hearts of the British people.

It was natural that the trustees of Cecil Rhodes should choose Dr. Parkin to administer his bequests and interpret his spirit. Rhodes was more than a British Imperialist. So was Dr. Parkin. Each regarded education as the source of character and conduct. They believed that schools and universities should produce men of high spirit, of liberal temper, of wide knowledge, and far outlook. They thought of the British Empire as a bulwark of peace and a model of free government, and of Oxford as a centre from which reconciling and liberalizing influences could proceed, where apostles of a tolerant nationalism could be produced, and through which the English-speaking nations could be reunited for the common ends of civilization.

In this relation Dr. Parkin became an interpreter of the British Empire to the United States through its universities and to the Dominions through all their chief seats of learning. Over and over again he challenged American prejudices and exposed American misconceptions of British character, British motives and British institutions.

As courageously he interpreted the Mother Country to the Dominions, not fearing even to bear tribute to the old governing families, or to emphasize the obligations resting upon the oversea countries to share in the burdens as well as in the privileges of British citizenship. But no word was ever spoken by Dr. Parkin which could breed ill will between the British Empire and the United States or which could be regarded in the Dominions as mere incense to an Imperial altar in London.

Indeed Dr. Parkin could not be a courtier nor a partisan. In his *Life of Edward Thring* he is reserved and judicial, sympathetic without fawning, admiring but not worshipping. No other biographer of Sir John Macdonald has been more courageous in censure or more just in recognition of qualities and services which command the enduring regard of the Canadian people. He had the confidence of Sir Wilfrid Laurier and of Sir Robert Borden, and many times British statesmen and the chief British newspapers sought his advice to the advantage of Canada and the Empire. He spoke often directly through *The Times* but more often in messages and articles in its columns which gave no hint of their origin. Among Canadians in London he was beloved, and as he grew older he grew ever more gracious in bearing and more serene in spirit. He believed greatly in the English public school and

sought, not without success, to develop its spirit in Upper Canada College. He lived as one trained in such a school would be expected to live and died as he would have desired to die, with all his mental vigour and still with adequate strength for the day's work. We mourn his loss, we honour his memory and we shall not forget:

We need our fathers' nobler ways,
Old virtues founded on their faith.
Their quiet homes, their ordered days,
Their joy in work, their calm in death.

